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# The Parody of Conquest in the Rainforest of Borneo: A Tale of Two Explorers

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## Abstract

Darwin once said that entering the tropics was akin to entering a whole new planet and many adventurous travellers to Southeast Asia echoed that sentiment: Isabella Bird in the nineteenth century and Eric Hansen and Redmond O'Hanlon in the late twentieth. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that the concept of terra incognita is never more forcefully manifested than in that other planet within the planet: that ecological marvel known as the rainforest. Borneo, third largest island in the world, is the site of one of the world's remaining primary jungle, eighty percent covered in 'steaming tropical rainforest' as Hansen himself enthuses in his book. Stranger in the Forest (1990).

AGNES YEOW

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Darwin once said that entering the tropics was akin to entering a whole new planet and many adventurous travellers to Southeast Asia echoed that sentiment: Isabella Bird in the nineteenth century and Eric Hansen and Redmond O'Hanlon in the late twentieth. Nevertheless, it is an indisputable fact that the concept of *terra incognita* is never more forcefully manifested than in that *other* planet within the planet: that ecological marvel known as the rainforest. Borneo, third largest island in the world, is the site of one of the world's remaining primary jungle, eighty percent covered in 'steaming tropical rainforest' as Hansen himself enthuses in his book, *Stranger in the Forest* (1990).[1]

The literary naturalist, Redmond O'Hanlon, and poet-friend, James Fenton, geared themselves for the penetration of this immense, unknown wilderness by consulting the Special Air Service in Hereford, famous or infamous for its vast experience in jungle reconnaissance and warfare. In O'Hanlon's comic account, *Into the Heart of Borneo* (1985),[2] the bungling jungle backpackers (an unlikely but nonetheless complementary duo, as O'Hanlon perceives it) approach the rainforest as one would a battlefield or at the very least, an alien country teeming with sinister enemies of the blood-sucking leech variety. Indeed, if these travellers' tales are to be deemed reliable, survival on this hostile and yet alluring planet depended on the express admission of one's vulnerability and abject helplessness for the jungle is an undiscriminating organic element, completely foreign and challenging. It demands of whoever ventures within its boundaries a radically altered mindset and temperament and in effect, a whole new personality and discipline.

Clearly, both O'Hanlon and Hansen were also conscious of the literary genre of which they were practitioners and inheritors and, to a large degree, set themselves up to parody the conventions and rhetoric of rainforest exploration. The result is near-carnivalesque laughter in the jungles of Borneo: the narratorial figures come across as adventure heroes-cum-conquerors of an hilarious sort as both men attempt to grapple with (and at times overturn) textual constraints and endure actual physical travails in mimicry of their illustrious predecessors.

I would also like to suggest at this juncture that ways of seeing the rainforest as a cultural entity, a mode of being and a way of life, are dominant issues

raised by both these narratives. In *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement,* Nelia Dias argues that 'looking at objects' exhibited in, say, a museum of anthropology enables a whole culture to be visualised and spatialised by means of typological and geographical arrangement (pp. 165–7) and that the corollary of that facility is that a society brought up on a diet of visual analogies can therefore objectify the Other quite readily as something definable, representational and tangible. The abstract becomes grounded in solid artefacts such as maps, images, diagrams, ethnographic specimen and even the printed word. The rainforest is one such 'cultural museum' of systematically ordered, valuable objects, animate or otherwise. The narrators barely miss anything, are in fact on the lookout, eagle-eyed and desirous of a rare sighting. Fenton constantly irritates O'Hanlon by gloating over his supposed spotting of rare species and animal behaviour. The deliberately ironic threat, 'I shall see something *marvellous*' (p. 133), is reminiscent of Columbus's own narrated voyage to the New World (also very much a new planet in its *extra-terrestrial* spectacle) where wonders (and not necessarily monstrosities) abound. The sense of the marvellous validates and empowers Columbus's claims as eyewitness, silencing his detractors and other sceptics in the process.[3] I would like to propose that the rainforest of Borneo is a culture of marvels in the eyes of Occidentals who derive great pleasure in simply looking.

In addition, in this new, wonderfully *inexplicable* construct called the rainforest, the marvels are not so much embodied in the weird or the grotesque but relocated in the unnerved traveller's initial sense of displacement and bewilderment and his final triumphant assimilation into the *culture*. Here is a taste of Hansen's initiation into the punishing and oppressive topography of the rainforest:

> Nothing had prepared me for the terrain through which we slowly travelled. The rainforest felt magical and enchanted as long as I was sitting still, but the moment I began walking it became an obstacle course of steep razorback ridges, muddy ravines, fallen trees, slippery buttressed tree roots, impenetrable thickets of undergrowth, and a confusion of wildly twisting rivers running in every direction. All of this was in the shade of the interlocking branches of giant rainforest trees. I became disoriented. Tributary streams filled with moss green boulders cascaded into space from unseen jungle precipices, creating an eerie rising mist that filled the rainforest and kept us damp all day. In this giant green house the air was saturated with the smell of damp earth and rotting vegetation. I exhausted myself trying to remain upright. It was futile. (p. 64)

Semantically dense and vivid passages like this one which create and heighten the drama of entry thrive in both works. They reinforce the view that the rainforest is an undiscovered, bottomless, deep-space universe, an abyss of natural wonders, pungent smells, invisible dangers and unnegotiable barriers liable to make your stay as uncomfortable and miserable as possible. Herein lies the supreme irony: it is precisely its inaccessibility that renders the humid, bug-infested jungle so sublimely seductive. Developing the metaphor of infinite space, Hansen describes his re-entry into modern-day civilisation by employing diving imagery: 'surfacing', 'cultural bends'. Deep in the interior of this

immensity, his physical response is figuratively described in the same pelagic terms:

> I could feel my body becoming tense and alert. I felt tight. The only similar sensation I can relate this to is the experience of swimming in the middle of the ocean where you *know* the water is many miles deep. The Kalimantan rainforest was like an unchartered, fathomless, green ocean, and I continued to nurture a healthy fear of the place. (p. 122)

The compelling notion of an 'uncharted' hinterland, a promising *terra nullius*, is perhaps the impetus for departure and throughout both journeys, the idea of discovering an unsullied Shangri-La within the bowels of this massive jungle presses the depressed, and jungle-weary travellers onwards. Blank spots on the maps and places marked with question marks and reliability warnings may cause alarm to the map-dependant traveller but they also appeal greatly to his sense of adventure in that the race to conquer the remote sectors of the huge Borneo rainforest that has, in his estimation, not yet been won. The temptation to conquer, name and therefore legitimise this marvellous new world is overpoweringly strong despite the traveller's frequent demystification of his own fantasies. O'Hanlon daydreams, misty-eyed, about standing at the summit of a peak 'Norgay-Tenzing like, breathing comfortably in [his] oxygen mask, unfurling, in the thin air, a Union Jack, and naming it Bukit Batu Baldy in honour of [his] companion' (p. 110). (James Fenton is noticeably bald.) Although the signs of unease are there (the traveller envisions himself as the Sherpa guide not Hillary and deftly turns the fantasy into a joke at his companion's expense) the rhetoric is glaringly colonial. What made the peak 'most alluring of all' was the fact that it 'possessed no name'. He is also self-assured that what he hopes to achieve is a first in the history of rainforest navigation: '... we're going to try and reach the Tiban mountains in the very centre of Borneo. Up the Rajang river. Up the Baleh to its source; and then we'll march through the primary jungle. No one's been since Mjoberg in 1926 — and he went in from the other side' (p. 10). Although the writer views himself and his companion as hilarious misfits in the jungle and their excursion a farce in itself, and although he is wont to expose his own folly and ludicrousness, the fact remains that underlying the tongue-in-cheek declaration of his goal is a desire to appropriate a certain unnamed and unclaimed tract of mountain. Even the Iban guides have never permeated that part of the world and can bear witness to and verify the achievement of their employers and wards. Hansen's original purpose was to become the first Westerner to discover an isolated Highland community in the Sarawak-Kalimantan border and pursue it he does to the bitter and painful end even whilst having to debunk his own fantasies that things would not have changed since his last visit six years earlier. The onset of extensive logging and other timber-related industries do more than upset Hansen's bearings.

Michel Butor, in contemplating the kinship between travel, reading and writing, suggests that any new, unknown land is highly textualised terrain ('already elaborated like a text'), that the traveller scans and surveys this land

with a conqueror's impulse and that 'even before the conqueror, the explorer seizes with his language the land he crosses'.[4] This is true of many of the literary journeys which O'Hanlon and Hansen are familiar with and which they would like to emulate albeit with a large dose of humour and self-parody thrown in. Their protagonists are no longer the sober, stiff-upper-lipped heroes of the past but rather laughable adventurers beleaguered by a keen sense of their own inadequacies and buffoonery. However, by and large, the discourse is still fundamentally if not self-consciously colonialist.

To begin with, in many respects, the tone of these explorers' stories is confessional. Hansen's narrator is remarkably transparent, sharing intimate emotions, thoughts, aspirations and even his erotic longings with the reader. Here is one particularly poignant outpouring from the psychiatrist's couch as he mourns the destruction of his shoes, 'a memento of [his] journey', by a mongrel:

> In its revolting mouth was one last small fragment of my dear shoes. The dog hadn't been playing with the shoes; he had eaten them both. All that was left were two black rubber soles covered with dog saliva and bite marks. I was heartbroken. Thousands of leeches had dined in those shoes, and now they were gone. The shoes, in an absurd way, had provided a sense of continuity to my trip. (p. 260)

Absurdity in the attachment of sentimental value to external objects is very much a facet of jungle travel for these travellers. O'Hanlon demonstrates his own fallibility by confessing that the ability to identify and affix labels to living organisms (thus automatically assigning them value) gratifies him. Habitually consulting his specialised books on Borneo wildlife, he confesses somewhat sheepishly that

> amidst the great press of unseen birds, the bewildering variety of clear calls and background chatter from the jungled banks of the river, it was again absurdly satisfying to have put a name to something, to have given its image firm and marked brain space, to have taken possession of *Hirundapus giganteus* and stored its flight in memory, to know that it was 'Resident in Borneo in small numbers' and that Smythies, too, thought that 'on the wing it has a queer heavy look'. (p. 93)

Semantically, words with negative connotations of ambiguity such as 'unseen', 'bewildering' and 'background' are offset by words denoting definition and certainty such as 'firm', 'marked' and 'know'. The act of naming nullifies the void of meaning. Naming is tantamount to taking possession, clarifying and 'storing'. The sentimental speaker here derives pleasure in discovering that he and his mentor, Smythies, are like-minded, kindred spirits, and that he must surely be on the right track scientifically.

I would like to posit that although anxious to discover something novel as in the tradition of literary exploration, the traveller projected in the narrative treads warily, equally anxious not to desecrate this relatively pristine and unsullied world; he wants to leave no scratches behind for he has come in peace not aggression. Does he secretly hope that this ennobling and conciliatory stance might vindicate his intrusion? O'Hanlon prevents and forbids his guide from killing a gibbon. 'In a month or two the vegetation would cover the Iban shelter,

the crossed poles of our basha frame, the Ukit message sticks and shredded ferns on the mountainside, and, rightly, not a trace of us would remain' (p. 145). The invasion is temporarily exonerated in that the traveller will gaze happily upon his surrounds and name interesting phenomena but his sojourn will be as brief and unobtrusive as possible, his intentions sincere and unoffending and he will thereafter be easily forgotten. (In some of his melancholic moods and weaker moments, Hansen's narrator has difficulty coming to terms with the fact that the memory of his walk in the jungle might be erased forever from the minds of his native friends.)

Hansen's persona indirectly expresses a similar desire to be as restrained as possible: he would merely tip-toe through the jungle, anonymous and undetectable.[5] The language evokes a sense of subdued progress, one which is physically exacting but at the same time congenial. The wilderness is regarded as an active agent, opening and surrendering itself readily to their canoes, making way, removing obstacles, forming instant pathways and ushering in their arrival. Hansen's perspective of the jungle embracing the traveller and yielding to his approach is strikingly close to O'Hanlon's. So is the wish for stealth.

> The river continued to narrow, and soon the tree branches from opposite banks met overhead, creating one long, green corridor ....
> Poling our way along the inky green waterway, we glided upstream through quiet still-water bends in the river, where mats of fragrant white flowers had gathered, closing behind the stern of our 24-inch-wide dugout and concealing any sign of our passage. (pp. 57–58)

The inviting 'long, green corridor' is indeed enticing and renders the rainforest accessible while the surreptitious advance (where signs of encroachment are simply erased by nature herself) conjures the necessary suspense of breaching a forbidden place and foregrounds the non-disruptive character of the traveller. O'Hanlon's description betrays the same ideas of a jungle encouraging and succumbing to the passage of the discreet interloper:

> The river itself began to turn and twist, too, the banks behind us appearing to merge together into one vast and impenetrable thicket, shutting us in from behind just as the trees ahead stepped aside a meagre pace or two to let the river swirl down ahead. The outboard motor, manned by Leon and set on a special wooden frame at the stern of the canoe, pushed us past foaming little tributaries, islets, shingle banks strewn with huge rounded boulders, half-hidden coves scooped round by whirlpools. (pp. 31–32)

Although the river is convoluted and the thicket 'impenetrable', the trees '[step] aside'. This discrepancy is compounded by the suggestion that the travellers are almost involuntarily sucked into the jungle: 'shutting us in from behind', 'pushed us'. Likewise, the 'mats of fragrant white flowers...[close] behind the stern', preventing retreat and exit.

All said, the rainforest remains utterly and necessarily unfamiliar territory in the imagination and experience of lettered, male, European travel writers despite the innumerable scientific expeditions mounted over the last two and a half centuries, volumes of research findings published and tomes of travel reportage

attempting to illuminate this green frontier. Perhaps it is this strangeness, real or imagined, that must be preserved at all costs for it presupposes a riddle that is crying out to be solved by the right 'stranger'. The notion of strangeness is two-pronged and cuts both ways. The white intruder is a stranger to these parts (which can be both to his advantage and to the detriment of his status) and the forest is strange, mysterious, inscrutable, throwing the ineffectual explorer completely off-balance and forcing him to relearn 'how to walk' (which proves a humbling experience but by the same token, proves the outsider a willing and worthy novice). Hansen is 'reduced to a childlike state, totally lacking in coordination and the ability to anticipate the ground surfaces' (p. 64). In this respect, the texts in question set themselves up for deconstruction for despite the apparent mystique of the forest, the sophisticated rhetoric implies that it is still a readable and *conquerable* place.

Consider the following extract where Hansen's jungle persona decodes the profuse flora and fauna and sees himself virtually engaged in amiable dialogue with the rainforest:

> At times the jungle closed in, and I had to follow tunnels cut through the interwoven mass of barbed vines, aerial roots, fallen branches, and dense shrubbery. These tunnels were cut for the local people, so I was forced constantly to duck. Sometimes I crawled on my stomach. Massive dead tree trunks covered in blue-green moss that appeared to have been caught in midfall by the tangle of vines and branches leaned at fantastic angles. Glittering armies of black ants filed across the trail, disappeared into a mat of twigs and rotting leaves, and reappeared a few yards farther on as they marched over a fallen tree and out of sight. Enormous heart-shaped leaves, three feet across, curtained either side of the trail, and I felt as if I were a small bug crawling through some fantastic garden. The staccato bursts of insect sounds, rasping and vibrating, filled the thick, moist air until I couldn't hear my footsteps. I recognised the lilting call of the bulbul and the distinctive leathery wingflap of the hornbill. I called to the birds, and sometimes I could get one to follow me. They would stay with me for a mile or so, keeping just out of sight. When one bird lost interest, I would try to attract another. I found myself imitating nearly every sound that I heard. I was trying to talk with the jungle. (pp. 181–82)

Here are any number of examples of aestheticisation suggesting the bizarre, the chaotic and the beautiful: 'lilting', 'staccato', 'glittering', 'fantastic', 'tangle', 'mass of barbed vines', 'interwoven', 'dense'. The prose is variously factual, evaluative, analytic, observational, visual, auditory and tactile. It is also emotive and figurative. Dichotomies of difference punctuate the discourse: wild havoc and chronic irregularity as opposed to method and order. Although the diction in the quoted passage is mainly lay person in its scientific vagueness (the species of ants, trees, insects are not identified), there is the suggestion that the landscape can and will yield itself to an empirical reading or scientific description, that the mess can be tidied up so to speak. Words conveying lexical notions of measurability, symmetry and precision such as 'three feet across', 'distinctive', 'wingflap', 'heart-shaped', 'blue-green', 'vibrating' and 'recognised' hint at the scholarly slant even as the metaphorical one takes precedence. The ability to merge science and sentiment has been the forte of

many early travellers and Hansen illustrates this to a fault. The narcissistic 'I' is at the heart of this Borneo adventure: 'I felt', 'I called', 'I recognised', 'I found', 'I crawled'. The speaker-traveller may strike one as the recipient of actions who exercises scant control over his progress ('I was forced', 'I had to follow') but he is also an active agent brimming with volition and purpose: 'I could', 'I would'. One also infers from the discourse that the 'tangle' and the 'density' while suggesting the absence of order and symmetry, are not impossible to disentangle, to dissect, or even to communicate with. The 'fantastic garden' myth implies an embellished and classifiable variety of vegetation or an Edenic setting, a little dishevelled and maze-like perhaps, but teeming with as yet untagged plants. Nevertheless, 'Adam' is self-effacing, trivialising himself as a 'small bug' and subjecting himself to the demeaning act of 'crawling'. The illusion of a labyrinthine jungle responding to the overtures of the speaker is achieved in statements like 'I called to the birds' and 'They would stay with me'. Communication is effected by the simple act of imitation. Echoes from the exotic jungle are indeed a potent discursive strategy for the jungle marcher especially if the echoes are those of his own voice.

O'Hanlon's flounderings are also given their due pride of place in the narrative. Groping and stumbling desperately in the relentless wild, Fenton and he appear pathetically impotent and ridiculous when compared to their composed and nimble-footed guides. 'But James and I on the move, over-laden, unfit, too old, missing our footing, slithering down slopes, crashing into trees, shish-kebab'd by rattan thorns, panting like an engine shed, must have woken every tarsier, coast to coast' (pp. 118–19). It is a foregone conclusion that in this endurance test, the traveller will emerge sore, traumatised and jungle-shocked but notwithstanding, jubilant and won over, despite or rather because of the sheer arduousness of jungle travel. The impression of physical clumsiness and cultural inaptitude, sometimes bordering on idiocy, is deliberately prevalent in O'Hanlon's story. The brunt of jokes, pranks, insults and the unwitting source of much amusement for the locals, he indulges his hosts' perception of him as an incorrigible clown. Hansen, on his part, 'felt comfortable making a fool of [himself]' (p. 144) and 'would elicit great hoots of laughter from them' (p. 128) without even trying. The buffoonery and repartee create the fanciful notion that the European and American outsiders are an entertaining and innocuous presence in the forest and therefore tolerable if not welcome in all their clumsiness and absurdity. They too are 'marvels'.[6] The ambiguous forest foundlings are duly adopted and feted by longhouse communities and at one critical point of the journey upriver, tragedy is averted when the Iban guide rescues Fenton from a watery grave.

Survival is a major and conventional theme in these literary travels. Hansen's sufferings in the wild, both physical and emotional, while not designed to tickle, are pitiable enough to touch the hardest soul. Crippling foot sores, filth and extreme exhaustion do nothing to deter him. His tenacity is nothing short of astounding. Hansen is the sentimental and often lugubrious protagonist, a benign white presence who imbibes the ethos of the jungle so well that he is mistaken for a native Kenyah (a useful disguise) with his native sun

hat, *parang* and brown skin. 'Things happen to him and he endures and survives. As a textual construct, his innocence lies less in self-effacement than in submissiveness and vulnerability, or the *display* of self-effacement.'[7] The reader is apt to commiserate with the defenceless and self-reproaching traveller as he lurches his way through the perceived confusion of vegetation, ridges, ravines and rapids. He confesses ardently that without his Penan guides, he would have perished. He views his relationship with them as that of a child and its protectors. Jungle illiteracy and jungle-sickness can be fatal.

So far, the discussion above part-illustrates the anti-conquest rhetoric as propounded by Mary Louise Pratt in her influential book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. In the tradition of Linnaeus and other natural historians of yore, these journeys are hardly colonial or racist conspiracies launched for the sinister purpose of imperial expansionism, subjugation and plunder. Neither are Hansen or O'Hanlon remotely concerned about the rise and fall of empires nor the establishment of trade routes, British or otherwise. However, the linguistic apparatus attributed to conquest narratives circumscribes the scope of the story-telling itself and the way these would-be jungle wallahs view and interpret their exotic surroundings. In true non-interventionist fashion, these journeys are personal, diplomatic, harmless, and to a large degree, sentimental accounts of the successes and failures of traversing an alien culture for the rainforest is indeed a way of life in itself. However, the resultant text bears an astute intertextual relationship with the host of writings which form the corpus of rainforest literature. Amazonian and Congo adventures, accounts of circumnavigation, mountaineering and other tales of conquest and high exploration written over the past three centuries have set conscious or unconscious parameters for travel writers today. Both men have read the same books (as the bibliographies testify), travelled vicariously along the same route (in real life, their itinerary overlapped in many places) and surely now face the same tremendous pressure to produce something original and therefore worthy to be inaugurated into the oeuvre of compulsory reading for any prospective rainforest explorer, armchair or actual. The laughter in the forest resonates with the parody of conquest but in some uncanny way, speaks the very same language of colonialism.

As such, the first characteristic that these two jungle navigators have in common is a profound sense of inadequacy or the *appearance* of inadequacy in grappling with the gruelling task at hand. At the outset, both express serious doubts and insecurities when faced with the monumental expedition ahead. Enlightenment in the form of the meticulous and extensive perusal of geographical, ethnographic, biological, botanical, anthropological and popular material did very little to dispel the anxiety. There is an unmistakable tone of self-parody in O'Hanlon's lament: 'The nearest I had ever come to a tropical rainforest, after all, was in the Bodleian Library, via the pages of the great nineteenth-century traveller-naturalists, Humboldt, Darwin, Wallace, Bates, Thomas Belt — and, in practice, a childhood spent rabbiting in the Wiltshire woods' (pp. 2–3). Hansen, on the other hand, had basked in the bliss of ignorance of more recent developments in the region and had 'fed [his] Borneo

fantasy with regular visits to the libraries of the University of California at Berkeley, where [he] had once been a student of industrial art and environmental design'.

> One day while I browsed through the stacks, I happened upon a complete collection of *Sarawak Museum Journals* from 1912 onwards. Everything one would like to know about Sarawak is contained in those thirty-five wonderful volumes ....
> In the library the pencil line that I effortlessly drew across the map connecting villages and traversing mighty mountains looked promising. It was not until I stood at the very edge of the Sarawak rainforest that I discovered most of the trails no longer existed and many of the longhouses were abandoned. It was then I also realised I had no idea what I was doing. (p. 31)

It is precisely this image of the benighted *orang putih* (white man), untutored and vulnerable in matters of the jungle, that Hansen and O'Hanlon succeed in evoking to an amazing degree.

The prodigious amount of reading may not prepare the traveller for the practical aspects and exigencies of the jungle march but the point is these are *literary* men (O'Hanlon reads avidly in the jungle, from the irrelevant *Les Miserable* of Victor Hugo to the relevant *The Pagan Tribes of Borneo* by Hose and McDougall) who like super sleuths have investigated the case thoroughly and are therefore *intellectually* equipped to enter this new planet regardless of the seeming foolhardiness of the whole enterprise. If anyone can do literary justice to the genius loci of the rainforest, they can. O'Hanlon sometimes flaunts an encyclopaedic and critical knowledge of the flora and fauna around him. He really has done his homework well. The contradiction is clear: research (maps, classifications, guides) proves almost redundant but is crucial nonetheless for misleading, dated and prejudiced information is better than no information whatsoever. Scholarliness and scientific curiosity justify the quest: Hansen describes his initial objective to reach the interior as a 'masterful piece of scholarly lunacy based on anachronistic information and [his] own half-baked notions of Sarawak that had been gleaned from a twelve-day drunken visit six years earlier' (p. 30). He may be insane and incompetent but the 'lunacy' is qualified and ameliorated by scholarship. O'Hanlon, a former Oxford academic, is well aware of the virtues of 'scholarly instincts' (p. 1), absorbing western rainforest literature like a madman before embarking uneasily but determinedly on his unusual and whimsical trip. There are also other benefits to be reaped from one's erudite and learned background. To hack and insinuate his way into the jungle, O'Hanlon had the ironic shrewdness to arm himself with institutional support:

> Under duress, Christopher Butler, then Senior Proctor at Oxford, had equipped us with a talisman of medieval-looking splendour (and a document which pleased me profoundly every time I sneaked a glance at it). Above the scarlet impression of the Great Seal of the University it proclaimed
>
> To whom it may concern
> This is to certify that
> JAMES FENTON, M.A.(Oxon),F.R.S.L.

and
REDMOND O'HANLON, M.A.,M.Phil.(Oxon)

are personally known to me, and are members of the University of Oxford.
They are travelling in Borneo for Scientific purposes, and I would be grateful for any help and assistance you can give them. (p. 21)

The testimonial-cum-introduction document (reminiscent of colonial practices) performs its magic and eliminates the bureaucratic obstacle in Kapit, the starting-point of O'Hanlon's itinerary.[8] Why O'Hanlon derived boyish glee and gratification from his little subterfuge is an interesting point to ponder. There is his wry sense of humour. There is also the plausible implication that he is reassured by an ostensibly justifiable reason for being at the jungle's fringe. The *raison d'etre* (the dubious but impressive 'Scientific purposes') mitigates the transgression of breaching the sanctity of the rainforest and he confidently and casually declares, tongue-in-cheek: 'I want permission to go up the Baleh to its headwaters and then to climb Mount Tiban ... James Fenton and I wish to re-discover the Borneo rhinoceros' (p. 21). This potentially comic and flippant pronouncement (the rhino in question is said to be on the verge of extinction) focusses on the eccentricity of the intruders and in a covert way, exonerates the travellers from the direct responsibility of encroaching on foreign territory. O'Hanlon's quirky sense of humour and enactment of high comedy in the jungle are anti-conquest. He is laughing his way out of complicity.

Hansen has a harder time fixing on any clear motive for setting foot in the rainforest and ruminates rather tiresomely on the matter with a great deal of soul-searching (the book is saturated with a great deal of introspective padding). The pioneering impulse spurs him to go where no man has gone, in search of the hypothetical and romantic highland valley separating Sarawak and Kalimantan, Indonesia, called the Apo Kayan-Kenyah country. In the same breath, he dismisses the whole imminent odyssey as merely a way of relieving the monotony of life in the city. His reasons tend to vacillate back and forth between the maudlin, the nostalgic, the poetic, the quixotic and sheer bravado.

Boredom — perhaps that is what made me return to Borneo? I have an extraordinarily low tolerance for boredom and routine.

Isabelle was right about there being no destinations. Travel is the act of leaving familiarity behind. Destination is merely a by-product of the journey. I guess what I wanted from my journey was a unique experience, something so far beyond my comprehension that I would have to step completely out of my skin to understand and become a part of my surroundings. That idea, more than anything else, had motivated me to pack my bag and leave San Francisco. The comfort and security of a successful business and a long-term relationship with a wonderfully talented, kind, and creative woman were not enough to hold me. (p. 44)

This ambivalence is an appropriate trapping of the non/anti-hero. He appears unsure of his intentions. He appears at a loss. He has rashly sacrificed almost everything for the sake of a novel experience only to confront despair and xenophobia. To some of the local inhabitants, he is suspicious, even mad to abandon the comforts of his civilisation and to subject himself to such torment

and hardship. His intrusion in the rainforest is to be pardoned for he had no way of knowing what he was up against. In one particular settlement he is accused of being a *bali saleng* or a mischievous jungle spirit on account of his solitariness and oddity. The subject of severe prejudice, distrust and sometimes humiliation, Hansen nevertheless appreciates the fact that he is *observed* even as he surveys and evaluates the landscape and its contents. The illusion of reciprocity consoles the guilt-ridden invader. There is a telling episode in Hansen's journey in which he had had to resort to telling an outright lie in order to bail himself out of a rather threatening situation. The jungle-dwellers had looked askance at him for solo wanderings in a volatile place populated with malevolent spirits who are to all intents and purposes, freakish and irrational. Cornered thus, Hansen has a brainwave and to explain his meanderings in the forest to an incredulous audience, he conveniently and resourcefully produces a mock amulet or spell-breaker in the form of a trinket, a stuffed banana pin. The villagers buy his story. Whatever the case, he is pleased to note that his walk in the forest has repercussions in the societies he encounters which, in turn, forces him to rethink his stance. The deceit itself signifies for Hansen the crossing over of a personal threshold (he is no longer a detached observer but a participant, albeit an untruthful one):

> The decision to present the banana pin as a powerful charm not only helped save me in this situation, but also forced me to reconsider how I was responding to the people. I stopped being the observer and began to accept their supernatural world, and my journey was never the same. In that single moment I grew much closer to my experiences. (p. 192)

In the end, for Hansen, the fabrication is legitimised and extenuated; associated not with the gullibility of his listeners or his own seeming condescension but with his discernment of the 'supernatural world' of the native peoples.

'Supernatural' contrasts with the scientificity (mock or otherwise) of both these journeys. For O'Hanlon, science is the passport required to gain access into the green yonder. O'Hanlon clings to and quotes liberally from Bertram E. Smythies' *The Birds of Borneo* (just one reference book in a long list) as if it were his life-support system and bible. There are pages in O'Hanlon's narrative which are bald, scientific description and analysis. Hansen punctuates his report with the obligatory botanical taxonomy, playing the expected role of herboriser and classifier of plants as did his illustrious predecessors. The job of 'collecting jungle products and medicinal plants of value' (p. 31) is strictly outlined for commercial and traditional barter in the course of his trip but the conventional tendencies to infuse the journey with scientific significance are evident. The compulsion to name and identify specimens as if one were on a scientific fact-finding expedition is an eloquent indicator of genre restrictions and is sometimes incongruous in parts of the narrative: 'There are still bands of nomadic hunters and gatherers who wander through the rainforest in groups of twenty-five to thirty-five to hunt wild pigs and search for sago palms (*Eugeissonia utilis*) from which they extract their staple food, sago flour' (p. 29). The implication is that the credibility of such a fantastical journey depends,

to a significant degree, on the scientific verification and endorsement of the project. Science also endows the traveller with the authoritativeness and authenticity without which his presence in the middle of *nowhere* or *elsewhere* is negligible if not offensive to himself and to his post-colonial sensibilities.

In addition, the illusion of privilege and advantage is integral to the convivial traveller's precarious position in this inhospitable and *Other* worldly environment. Passing through this timeless forest where to travel is to experience the primeval, the simple and the instinctive, he makes it his conscious duty to *blend in* and to win the approval of the inhabitants, even or sometimes *especially* at his own imagined expense. However, his objective is not mere acceptance but concession and immunity to traverse the forest of his desire. One of O'Hanlon's guides, Dana, an Iban Headman no less, speaks the magic words which translated by Leon, another jungle pilot, is as follows: 'He welcomes you ... He say you have come far, from the country of our old Rajahs. And now we take you on a great journey to Bukit Batu Tiban, where we have never gone. But Dana he know of it. He says we will go there, because the spirits like you' (pp. 27–28). The supernatural partiality and sanction are indeed fortuitous boons to the traveller for it appears that the gods themselves look with favour upon the whole operation. Rituals of appeasement centre around these travellers who are virtually given the task of invoking the gods extemporaneously. The 'old Rajahs', namely James, Charles and Charles Vyner, absolute monarchs who had advocated the 'Brooke tradition' of close and informal consultation in their rule of Sarawak, had paved the way for the steady stream of official and unofficial visitors to Sarawak. 'You stayed in the longhouse and you lived with the people ... we behaved like natives. We accepted Dayak conditions as they were'.[9] The point is that unannounced visitors to Sarawak also grew to expect and to benefit from the friendly and benevolent longhouse treatment. Longhouse hospitality and goodwill became almost a given *right.*

In Hansen's case, the assumption of *the other* as *self* comes to a head when he is made honorary Kelabit and Kenyah as appropriate new names are conferred upon him by his hosts: at journey's end, he is Eric Hansen alias Rajah Kumis alias Asang Jalong. The local people like him. On occasion, the adaptable stranger not only earns the trust of his hosts but also becomes assimilated into the tribe, stranger no more but friend. One by one, obstacles are surmounted and the jungle seems to beckon and embrace the visitor; so much so that even though one did not truly belong, the thought of leaving the rainforest evokes intense feelings of abandonment, exile and dejection. 'The jungle had just spat me out like a piece of old chewing gum' (p. 173). Although the status of most favoured stranger is not actively solicited in both cases, the underlying desire to ingratiate oneself with the natives remains.

The implication seems also to be that the traveller's adamant if not wilful pursuit of his obscure Shangri-La or El Dorado is vindication in itself for being in the jungle. His dogged persistence, his sacrifices, his exceeding discomfort, his agony of being in a strange land far from home and the incredible miles

logged to reach the forest all testify to the stranger's merit. Surely these weary travellers have suffered enough adversities?

The bearing and exchange of gifts (Dana even offers his daughter's hand if the foreigner would tarry long enough to warrant the union), skills (the white man has useful skills too especially pertaining to medicine, first-aid and disco dancing), talents, commodities ('[John and Tingang Na] were also tempted by the illegal shotgun shells I was offering as wages' [61]) and information (indigenous names of animals and plants are accorded their due place alongside their scientific Latin counterparts) are powerful tropes of the desired reciprocity and equality. The natives are highly *visible* protagonists conspicuously central to these narratives, no longer passive elements of the landscape relegated to the periphery of events and situations. They laugh loud and long when tickled. They mock gently and are gently mocked in return. The rhetoric and the information selected for narration reveal a seemingly mutual, symbiotic and equal relationship between obliging, protective host and apologetic, endearing guest. The travellers are pleased to note that their guides too, for all their skills and wits, are susceptible to leeches and mosquitoes. Hansen observes that '[he] wasn't the only one who suffered that night. Bo'Hok and Weng didn't have mosquito nets, so they nursed a smoky fire with damp wood to keep away sand flies and mosquitoes. The blinding cloud of hot, choking smoke kept [them] hacking and sneezing until dawn' (pp. 155–56). 'The Iban were also suffering, and we spent the next few minutes pulling leeches off our persons and wiping them on the trees,' writes O'Hanlon (p. 118). The impression of bilateral cooperation and fellowship may appear to undermine the image of total dependence and surrender on the part of the white stranger (established and largely sustained throughout the discourse) but in actual fact does not. The tribal societies, finely attuned to the rhythms and dangers of the rainforest still hold the trump card. As long as the stranger is not in the position to argue, he finds relief in every tiny opportunity which may soothe his feelings of worthlessness. O'Hanlon unabashedly plays 'doctor' in the longhouses of Sarawak. In one such instance, he gratefully and generously ministers to an ailing old woman: 'Her old eyes were bloodshot, her eyelids swollen. Feeling useful and needed, I pulled out my medicine pack and found the antibiotic eye drops. Smiling broadly she disclosed her gums. Not a tooth to be seen. I squeezed in some drops and she clapped her hands' (p. 61). The applause resounds with the illusion of approbation.

In a related development, Peter Bishop's contention in his book on Western travellers to Tibet over the centuries, *The Myth of Shangri-La*,[10] is:

> As Tibet became an intimate part of the Western psyche, the separation from it was felt as an *exile*. The journey to Lhasa was experienced on a depth level less as a *going* than as a *returning*. (p. 189)

In much the same way, the rainforest is the myth of a *lost* home which needs to be regained. The sense of a homecoming is explicit in Hansen's discourse (though not so for O'Hanlon who viewed his stay in the jungle as a 'two-month exile'): 'During our stay I had a familiar sensation in my stomach, the one we

all get when we return to a familiar and loved place. I felt as though I had "come home"' (p. 25). The *deja vu* of travelling to one's source is also indicative of a certain rightness or propriety of the journey. What can be so wrong about going home?

As we have seen, *home* proves difficult territory for both O'Hanlon and Hansen whose struggle though the jungles of Sarawak, though highly caricatured and deliberately sardonic in places, reveals an ideological debt to the hegemonic European-Oriental mode of travel writing so prevalent in the past couple of centuries as well as in the numbered days of the twentieth.

## NOTES

1 All references made to this text are sourced from Eric Hansen, *Stranger in the Forest: On Foot Across Borneo* (London: Abacus, 1990).

2 All references to this text are sourced from Redmond O'Hanlon, *Into the Heart of Borneo* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985).

3 Stephen Greenblatt discusses this in *Marvellous Possessions: The Wonders of the New World* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991), pp. 72–81.

4 *Temperamental Journeys: Essays on the Modern Literature of Travel,* Michael Kowalewski, ed. (Athens: Georgia, 1992), p. 63.

5 In twentieth-century travel writing, anonymity and camouflage are conditions and conscious strategies of travel inasmuch as the traveller fancies himself or herself an ephemeral presence; it also becomes a means of self-preservation. Hansen's speaker is known chiefly and vaguely as '*Tuan*', the equivalent of 'sir' but redolent of 'white master', something which troubles him; whereas Redmond and James are addressed as 'Redmon' and 'Jams', a propitious distortion of names and therefore, identities.

6 Greenblatt has argued this point: that 'reverse wonderment' betokens the intelligence of the natives and not their naivete, thus I feel, sparing the visitors the indignity of being laughed at by inferior-minded souls. The concept of the marvellous is not attached to things grotesque or bizarre but instead captures the character and spirit of an entire place, 'a place of surprising and intense beauty', the 'landscape of delight' (p. 77). To be marvellous then is advantageous, an enviable position to assume.

7 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 78.

8 Incidentally, letters of introduction such as the one Odoardo Beccari presented to H.H. Sir Charles Brooke written by the ruler's uncle, Sir James Brooke, the first European monarch of Sarawak, are powerful tools for opening doors and establishing authority in the eyes of the natives.

9 Charles Allen, *Tales from the South China Seas* (London: Abacus, 1994), p. 156.

10 Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989).